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Swallowtail Spirits, like most good things, was born from several failed attempts. When owner and founder Kevin Barrett moved to Oregon, he found himself focusing his attention on the local craft brewing movement, which led him to brewing his own beer. However, his experimentation with beer went poorly more often than it went well, and he realized that his bad beer could be put to use for something else: to make a good whiskey.

Encouraged by his friends, he began dabbling in distilling in 2008 and distilled his first vodka in 2014, under the license of another distillery. Now, only four years later and with a little help from America’s Small Business Development Center, he oversees Swallowtail Distillery in Springfield, Oregon, with a wide range of spirits and accolades to his name.

In 2016, Swallowtail had to move to a larger facility, and that is when things really kicked off. Within eight months, the team released two gins and won more than eight international awards for their work, including a double gold from the Seattle International Spirits Awards for their flagship premium vodka drawing with the famous Grey Goose. Now, they produce four gins, numerous whiskeys, and five vodka infusions, as well.

Swallowtail Spirits was named after the official Oregon State insect, the Swallowtail Butterfly. The Swallowtail became the official insect of Oregon in 1979, two years after it became one of the first four butterflies to be printed on a US postage stamp. These butterflies, so named for the long tips of their wings, are reminiscent of the tails of swallows. Beautiful and elegant, the Oregon Swallowtail represents the purity, craft, and freedom of the distillery and all that its bottles contain.

Oregon has always been well-known as a great region for wine, beer, and volcanic rock, as well as local agriculture. So, part of what fueled Kevin’s love affair with the state he moved to all those years ago is now fueling exciting collaborations both with local fruit suppliers and the local contractor who produces the neutral grain spirit that becomes their vodka. Kevin is proud to say that this is the only way they can distill onsite and keep up with increasing demand. Another exciting project is with local brewer Ninkasi, whose Otis Oatmeal Stout is trans-formed into Irish whiskey by Kevin’s hand before he sends the used barrels back to Ninkasi to age more stout. This innovation is only one of the reasons Swallowtail was named Oregon Distillery of the Year in the 2017 New York International Spirits Competition.

Kevin is proudly committed to the environment, using non-GMO corn sources for the neutral spirit, as well as using innovative barrels called “squarrels” (or, square barrels) for much of his whiskey production. Swallowtail also repurposes second-hand stills, such as the “redhead,” the big copper pot still affectionately named Ginger, which is responsible for much of his gin, whiskey, and moonshine. Ginger has an extra rung at the top, giving one more layer of rectification to the vapors. Swallowtail also sources locally from the water of one of the cleanest rivers in the US to the fruit they infuse their vodka with even as they lay plans to foray into the luxurious and international world of fine brandy.

With a clear consciousness of its natural, local surroundings, Swallowtail works hard to be sustainable, using the water from a nearby river, the McKenzie River, to blend its liquor; this water filters through the volcanic rock and sediment of the Pacific Northwest, via the Willamette Lowland Aquifer System, over many years. And they seek to mirror this in their process of distillation, filtering the vodka sixty times through activated carbon, so that when the high-concentration spirit is blended with this water, both are at their polished peak of purity.

The Swallowtail Distillery Premium Vodka is often infused with fruit flavors such as marionberry, blackberry (soon to be replaced with boysenberry), and apple cider. Swallowtail Spirits Raspberry Vodka is the prize-winning standout from this collection, having won a silver medal this year from the American Craft Spirits Association in the “Vodka and Grain Spirits” category. Swallowtail creates these concoctions by steeping the fruit in a 110-gallon metal tank full of vodka. Then, they siphon the liquid from the top, letting the pulp sink to the bottom and filter the fruity infusion one final time to remove impurities.

The tiny team of partners behind Kevin are all as enthusiastic as he is about sharing handcrafted, quality spirits with as many people as possible, and they try to turn out at least 100 cases of vodka a day (the bottles are screen-printed rather than hand-labeled, to make this possible). And, their spirits are already on sale in more than 100 stores across the state. Making high-quality, small-batch bottles accessible and eco-friend-ly showcases the values which are truly at their core